By What Authority?

For People Drawn to Christianity

A Reading for Those Who Sense Something Real but Cannot Accept Parts of What It Became

By What Authority? — For People Drawn to Christianity
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The thing you are sensing

Something in the tradition attracts you. Maybe it is the love-your-enemies saying. Maybe it is the idea of unconditional acceptance, of worth that does not depend on performance. Maybe it is the figure of someone who sat with the excluded, the shamed, the unclean, and treated them as if the categories did not apply.

But then you read the rest.

A God who commands genocide. Women told to be silent. Slaves told to obey their masters. A threat of eternal punishment for those who believe incorrectly. Submission to governing authorities regardless of what those authorities do. Judgment, hierarchy, and a narrow gate.

You are not wrong to be uneasy. Those passages are in there. You cannot read around them. And if you are honest, the attempt to explain them away — "it was a different time," "it is being taken out of context," "God had reasons" — does not quite work. You can hear when an explanation is a rationalisation. Most people can.

This reading does not ask you to stop being uneasy. It asks whether you have considered the possibility that those specific passages were added later.

What the scholarship actually shows

This is not a conspiracy theory or a new-age reinterpretation. It is built on mainstream textual scholarship.

The New Testament as you have it did not arrive from the first century unchanged. Every serious New Testament scholar agrees that texts were altered during the transmission process. The only arguments are about scope and intent. Bart Ehrman, a former evangelical who now teaches at the University of North Carolina, documents this in detail in *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (1993). His conclusion: scribal changes in the early centuries of Christianity were not random. They moved in a consistent direction — toward the theological positions the proto-orthodox party was trying to establish.

That is the conservative statement of the case. The claim this reading examines is stronger.

Of Paul's thirteen attributed letters, scholars broadly distinguish seven as authentically Pauline: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The remaining attributed letters are widely disputed, and several are commonly treated as pseudonymous.

What is less widely acknowledged is that even the seven genuine letters show signs of later addition. Specific passages within them disrupt the surrounding argument, shift in writing style, appear first in the writings of authors who opposed an early Christian movement called Marcionism, and serve institutional needs that would not have existed in the first century.

When the relevant tests are applied — structural interruption, writing-style shift, manuscript or patristic attestation, institutional usefulness, and theological direction — they flag the same passages repeatedly. The passages they flag include:

- **Romans 13:1–7** — "submit to governing authorities, for all authority comes from God"
- **1 Corinthians 14:34–35** — "women should be silent in the churches"
- **1 Thessalonians 2:14–16** — the passage used historically to justify hostility toward Jewish people
- **Romans 9–11** — the covenant-continuity section reasserting Israel's special status
- **2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1** — "do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers"

These are the passages that produce the most discomfort. And they are the passages the scholarship most consistently identifies as later additions.

This is not confirmation bias. The methodology does not begin by asking "which passages would I prefer not to be original?" It begins by applying the same tests to every passage and recording where they cluster. They cluster here.

How the tests work

The series uses five core evidence tests, applied verse by verse across Paul's seven authenticated letters and implemented in Companion A as twelve signal codes. No single test is decisive. The argument rests on convergence.

Structural interruption — does the passage break the logic of the surrounding argument? The surest cases are passages that can be removed without loss, and where the text on both sides reads more coherently without them than with them. Romans 13:1–7 interrupts an argument about love. Remove it: Romans 12 ends with "do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" and Romans 13 continues with "let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another." The submission-to-authority passage disappears without a trace of absence. The women-silence passage in 1 Corinthians 14 sits inside a chapter that gives explicit instructions for women who prophesy publicly — instructions that only make sense if women were speaking. With the silence passage removed, the chapter is consistent. With it present, the same letter both instructs women how to prophesy and tells them to be silent.

Writing-style and vocabulary — does the passage use words, idioms, or sentence structures that appear nowhere else in Paul's authenticated letters, or that appear frequently in letters widely regarded as pseudonymous? Systematic vocabulary analysis across the corpus flags specific passages for divergence. The household codes in Colossians and Ephesians use terms and constructions that appear throughout the Pastoral Letters — letters almost universally regarded as pseudonymous — and are largely absent from Galatians, Romans, and the Corinthian correspondence.

Manuscript and patristic attestation — does the passage appear in the earliest manuscript witnesses? Is it cited by the earliest writers who would have needed it? The absence of a passage from the writings of authors who are directly addressing the topic the passage concerns is a significant negative

signal. Clement of Rome, writing in the late first century, addressed the question of women's roles in his community without citing the verse that would have been decisive if it were authentic. Ignatius of Antioch, writing around 110 CE and deeply concerned with church order and hierarchy, does not cite it either.

Institutional usefulness — does the passage solve a specific institutional problem that postdates Paul? A passage telling Christians to submit to Roman authority is institutionally useful for a church seeking to establish itself without threatening imperial power. A passage telling slaves to obey their masters is institutionally useful for a church drawing wealthy household-owners into membership who would resist any suggestion that the institution disrupted household order. These are not problems that existed in the same form in the 50s CE when Paul was writing to small communities meeting in rented rooms.

Theological direction — does the passage move toward the unconditional grace Paul defends elsewhere, or away from it? Every identified addition moves toward conditions, hierarchy, law, and institutional control. Not one moves in the other direction. Random copying errors scatter in all directions. A consistent direction indicates purpose. This is the asymmetry that the series treats as its core argument.

What was there before

Around 140 CE, a man named Marcion arrived in Rome from Sinope on the Black Sea. He had been a ship owner, prosperous enough to make a substantial donation to the Roman Christian community on arrival. He also brought a theological position that was, by any measure, striking.

Marcion argued that the God of the Hebrew scriptures and the Father that Jesus revealed were not the same being. The Hebrew God — the Creator — was real. He made the physical world and governed it through law, covenant, and justice. He was not evil, but he was not the ultimate reality. He kept accounts. He rewarded obedience and punished violation. He required sacrifice. His justice was retributive and his covenant was conditional.

The Father Jesus revealed was something different entirely. He was unknown before Jesus. He operated outside the Creator's framework, making no prior claim on anyone, requiring nothing in advance. He extended himself to everyone — the evil and the good, the just and the unjust — before any account of merit was consulted.

The Roman church expelled Marcion in 144 CE. He founded his own communities, which spread rapidly across the Roman Empire. Marcionite communities survived for centuries.

What matters for this reading is not whether Marcion was right. What matters is what he preserved.

Marcion assembled Paul's letters into a collection before the proto-orthodox party did. He also preserved a version of a gospel — related to what became Luke — that scholars can partially reconstruct through the extensive quotations of his opponent Tertullian. That gospel opens with Jesus appearing as a fully formed adult in Capernaum. No birth narrative. No genealogy. No Bethlehem. No childhood. No virgin mother. Jesus simply arrives.

In 2013, New Testament scholar Jason BeDuhn published *The First New Testament: Marcion's Scriptural Canon*. BeDuhn is not a Marcionite. He had no

theological stake in the outcome. His finding was this: the "sweeping redaction Marcion supposedly carried out to purge positive references to Jewish scriptures and to bring the text into harmony with his doctrines fails to materialise." Marcion left in place dozens of Old Testament citations, Creator-God references, and law-positive material. An ideological editor would not have done so. BeDuhn's work therefore weakens the simple claim that Marcion merely cut away orthodox material. It leaves the priority question open. This series argues that the shorter Marcionite form is often better explained as preserving an earlier textual state.

That matters because of what happened next. When Marcion published his canon in 144 CE, the proto-orthodox response was immediate and systematic. Tertullian wrote five books against him. Irenaeus devoted large sections of his major work to refuting him. The Muratorian Canon — the first formal canonical list — was produced specifically to counter Marcion's collection. And the interpolated passages that trouble modern readers appear first, most prominently, in that anti-Marcionite literature. Romans 9–11 in Origen arguing against Marcion. Romans 13:1–7 in Irenaeus defending submission to Roman authority. 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 in Tertullian arguing for women's silence.

The picture this series argues for is this: Marcion's collection preserved an earlier, relatively unedited state of Paul's letters. The major editorial work — the additions now in the canonical text — came largely after and in response to Marcion's canonisation of Paul, as the institution built its counter-canon and retrofitted the apostolic authority it needed.

What the older text says

When the most well-evidenced additions are set aside, what remains?

It is worth sitting with this question rather than answering it too quickly. The passages most reliably identified as original are Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon — letters where Marcion's text and the canonical text are close, where the writing style is consistent throughout, and where no mainstream scholar identifies significant additions.

Galatians is Paul at his most raw and unguarded. He is furious. He has just learned that people are pressuring his communities in Galatia to take on Jewish religious practices — circumcision, dietary laws, the ritual calendar — as if those things were required to stand before God. His response is close to contemptuous:

> *You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? That persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.* (Galatians 5:7–8)

What he calls "Judaising" is the pressure to attach conditions to the unconditional. To say: yes, grace, but first you must satisfy this requirement. Yes, belonging, but only if you mark your body in this way, or follow this calendar, or belong to this community. The grace becomes conditional. It is no longer grace.

His statement of the alternative is the most quoted sentence in his letters:

> *There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28)

This is not a pious aspiration about spiritual equality while maintaining social difference. Paul used it in a specific argument about who belonged and who did not. The ritual markers that determined social standing — ethnic identity, legal status, gender — did not constitute the community. They were dissolved by the prior reality that grace had already arrived.

Romans, when stripped of its most contested sections, reads the same way. Its structural centre is Romans 8:1–17. The key verse is verse 1:

> *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* (Romans 8:1)

Not: there is no condemnation for those who have prayed the right prayer, followed the correct doctrine, been baptised in the right church, or maintained sufficient obedience. *No condemnation.* Full stop.

Romans 8 continues: nothing in all creation — no ruler, no power, no height, no depth — can separate you from the love of God. That is either the most important statement in all of Paul's letters or it is nullified by everything around it. The reconstruction argues it is the most important statement. The additions around it argue it is conditional. The reconstruction says the conditions were added.

What kind of God is this

The question the reconstruction opens is the hardest one: what is Paul actually describing?

He is not describing a God who has softened. He is not describing a God who overlooks sin for now but will eventually require full payment. He is not describing a God who loves you but whose law also condemns you, requiring a mechanism to square the two.

He is describing something that cannot easily be contained within the God of the Hebrew scriptures. Which is why Marcion concluded they were not the same being.

Paul's most compressed description of the Father's governing logic appears in the love-your-enemies saying preserved in the oldest recoverable layer of the gospel tradition:

> *He makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.* (Matthew 5:45; also in Marcion's Evangelion)

This is grace as the prior reality. Not mercy as an after-the-fact softening of judgment. Not forgiveness extended after sufficient repentance. But the sun rising before anyone has done anything. Before the account is opened. Before worthiness has been established or undermined.

The Creator-God keeps accounts. He is just. His justice requires that accounts be settled — hence the elaborate sacrificial mechanisms, the atonement theology, the substitution of Christ for the deserving punishment of humanity. That logic is internally coherent. It is the logic of law. It requires payment.

The unknown Father does not. He cannot, because if he did — if he required even one condition to be met before he would extend himself — he would not be operating from grace. He would be operating from law with a different settlement mechanism.

This is why Paul says in Galatians: "if righteousness could come by the law, Christ died for nothing." He is not disparaging the law. He is pointing out that the two systems are categorically incompatible. You cannot have unconditional grace and conditional access at the same time. One of them will win. The canonical tradition let conditional access win.

What does the unknown Father do instead of keeping accounts? He acts by entering the place law cannot finally control: the person. Paul's phrase is: *Christ lives in me.* Not Christ commanding from above. Not Christ adjudicating from a distance. Christ present within the one whom law can accuse, punish, or kill without reaching what has been given there.

This is not mysticism in the sense of something obscure. It is the claim that there is something inside a person that law, judgment, punishment, and condemnation cannot finally diminish. Not because the person has done enough to earn it, but because it was given before the question of earning arose.

What was added and why

The passages most reliably identified as later additions solve specific institutional problems.

The governing-authorities passage (Romans 13:1–7) solves the problem of a politically exposed community under Roman rule. A community that says "submit to every human institution" is not a revolutionary threat. The community Paul was actually building — in which "there is no slave or free" and people met across household and class lines — was. This passage gave the institution what it needed to survive in the Roman world: an apostolic statement that its members were no threat to public order.

The women-silence passage (1 Corinthians 14:34–35) solves the problem of women in leadership roles disrupting the hierarchical order the institution was trying to establish. Paul's actual letters name women as co-workers, apostles, and leaders of house churches: Phoebe is described as a deacon and patron of many; Junia is named as an apostle; Priscilla is listed ahead of her husband Aquila, which in ancient convention signals the more prominent partner. The passage silencing women sits awkwardly in a chapter that gives instructions for women who prophesy publicly (1 Corinthians 11) — instructions that only make sense if women were expected to speak.

The household codes — scattered through letters now identified as pseudonymous (Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Timothy) — solve the problem of bringing the institution into alignment with Roman social expectations. Husbands over wives, masters over slaves, bishops over congregations. This is the Creator's world's social order given an apostolic warrant. It is the architecture of every hierarchy the tradition subsequently defended.

The Israel theology (Romans 9–11) solves the problem of legitimacy. If Christianity is the fulfilment of the Hebrew covenant, it inherits the deep cultural weight of that tradition. If it is not — if Paul's gospel announces a God who was entirely unknown before Jesus — then it has no prior claim, no

covenant to fulfil, no scripture that anticipated it. The institutional need for continuity with the Hebrew tradition is obvious. The passage that provides it is the most structurally anomalous section of Romans.

The direction of every addition is the same: toward conditions, hierarchy, law, and institutional control. Not one identified addition moves in the other direction. That asymmetry is the argument. Random copying errors scatter in all directions. A consistent direction indicates purpose.

What this is not

This is not an argument that Paul was right about everything, or that you must adopt his theological framework.

This is not an argument that Marcion was a saint or that his communities were without problems. They developed their own institutional structures and their own orthodoxies. The reconstruction does not require you to become a Marcionite.

This is not an argument that the Hebrew tradition is inferior or that Jewish people are wrong. Paul was himself a Jew, and the reconstruction understands his argument as directed against a specific institutional pressure — the use of covenant categories to sort people into insiders and outsiders — not against the tradition as a whole.

This is not an argument that the entire Bible is worthless. The reconstruction uses the canonical text as its primary evidence. It takes the texts seriously enough to read them forensically.

What it is: a case that the most troubling passages — the ones you could not accept — were probably not original. That the tradition you sensed something in is also the tradition that edited its most radical content to make it institutionally manageable. That the Jesus who attracted you was preserved in something closer to Paul's actual letters than in what became orthodox Christianity.

The thing that was preserved

Philemon is a letter Paul wrote to a slave owner named Philemon on behalf of his slave Onesimus, who had apparently run away or caused some loss to his master.

In the Roman world, the law was clear. A runaway slave was returned to their master. The master had the right to punish, sell, or kill them.

Paul does not make a legal argument. He does not cite scripture. He does not invoke a hierarchical authority. He says this:

> *Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a while was that you might have him back forever — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.* (Philemon 1:15–16)

Not: release him because the law requires it. Not: release him to earn righteousness. But: you are now in a community where the category of slave no longer defines how you relate to him. He is a brother. You can keep the legal relationship if you choose. But something has changed in what that relationship means.

This is the reconstruction's evidence for what Paul was doing. Not arguing against slavery as an institution — he had no power to do that. But dissolving, within his communities, the categories on which it rested. The later household codes that told slaves to obey their masters, accepted without question by the institutional church, move in exactly the opposite direction.

Paul names the members of his community across every social boundary the Roman world recognised. He writes to mixed communities of Jews and Greeks, enslaved people and free people, men and women in leadership roles. The categories he says are dissolved are not abstract. They map exactly onto the lines along which the Roman social world was stratified. And they map exactly onto the lines the later institutional additions drew right back in.

One of these voices is Paul's. The other claims to be.

What the reconstruction changes

The reconstruction does not ask you to accept Paul as authoritative. It asks something more limited: whether you have been reading the real Paul, or the version that passed through an institutional filter.

The version you probably encountered — in church, in popular culture, in the citations that attach Paul's name to the worst of what Christianity produced — is the filtered version. It is Paul-plus-additions. The additions are not subtle. They sit awkwardly in their contexts. They move in a consistent direction. They appear at the precise historical moment when the institution needed them. They solve problems Paul did not have.

What the reconstruction opens is the question of whether the thing you sensed in the tradition — the unconditional acceptance, the dissolution of social categories, the love-your-enemies logic — was Paul's actual voice. The evidence suggests it was. And the evidence also suggests that the voice that systematically overrode it was not Paul's voice. It was the institution's.

Where you might go from here

You do not have to accept any of this to find it useful.

If you are someone who has been told that unease about the Bible is a failure of faith, this reading is telling you something different: your unease may be detecting something real. The tradition you sensed something in has been edited. The most troubling parts have the most forensic evidence of later addition. The scholars who flagged them were not doing so because they disliked what the passages said. They were doing so because multiple tests — structure, style, attestation, institutional usefulness, and theological direction — converged on the same places.

If you want to go further, the primary material is in this series: *Volume 2 — How Paul's Letters Were Edited* examines the textual evidence in full. *Companion B — The Reconstructed Pauline Letters* presents the seven authentic letters with the most evidenced additions removed so you can read what remains.

If you want the shortest possible version of the reconstructed voice, read Galatians. It required the least reconstruction of any Pauline letter. It is the clearest expression of what Paul was doing before the later additions settled in. And it begins, unusually, with no pleasantries — Paul goes straight to the point, because what he is defending is the thing he thought was most important and most under threat.

> *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — which is really no gospel at all.* (Galatians 1:6–7)

The different gospel he is objecting to is the one that attached conditions. His gospel is the one without them.

Whether that is the gospel you have been looking for is something only you can determine. This reading is not trying to recruit you. It is trying to

tell you that what you sensed may have been real, and that there are forensic grounds for taking that sense seriously.

A note on how this is offered

Everything in this series is free. The PDFs, the dataset, the analysis tools — no paywall, no credential requirement, no institutional gate.

The tradition this series examines controlled access to the text. The language was kept in Latin. Direct reading was managed, filtered, and at times formally prohibited. The distance between a person seeking something real and the primary sources was a deliberate structural feature, not a historical accident.

The logic of what the series argues requires the opposite approach. If the Father's offer does not wait for qualification or merit — if grace precedes the transaction — then an inquiry into the evidence for that offer cannot be made available only to those who have already qualified. It is available before you have done anything to earn it.

Whatever you do with what you find here is yours to decide. That is the point.

This document summarises the theological and textual argument developed in Volumes 1 and 2 of the By What Authority series. Scholarly citations, methodology, and evidence are in those volumes.